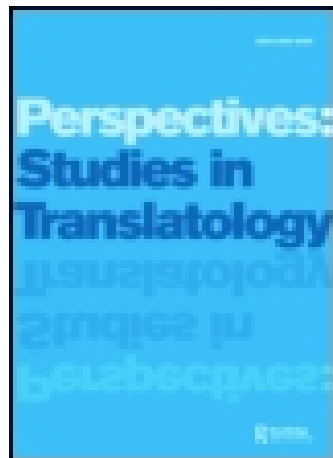




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Two Translations of the Chinese Cinderella Story

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Tang writer Duan Chengshi's story of Ye Xian is generally regarded as the precursor of the Western Cinderella. This essay attempts to fill in a gap in folklore criticism by exploring two English translations of this Chinese story, to see how Arthur Waley's translation serves to build up a feminist tension in the translated text, especially when compared with Barbara Creed's more 'correct' translation, as well as highlighting the feminist potential of the original Chinese text, contrary to the meagre cultural criticism that tends to bring out the subordinate female position in the story. As such, Waley's translation predicts the ways with which the Chinese story has been appropriated by various feminist writers in different contexts.

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Keywords: Cinderella, feminism and translation, sexuality, feminist appropriation

Though *Cinderella* is generally known as a Western story, its most widely circulated version being the one in the collected tales of Brothers Grimm, in the past few decades Sinologists and folklorists have shifted their attention to what is known as its older Chinese version,¹ written between AD 850 and 860 (Waley, 1963: 147). Duan Chengshi 段成式, a Tang writer, tells of the story of Ye Xian 叶限 in *You Yang Za Zu* 《酉阳杂俎》, or *Miscellaneous Morsels from Youyang*, who is kindhearted and diligent, and who, after the death of her parents, is maltreated by her stepmother and stepsister. Her only friend is a fish, which she rears in the pond, and which later gets killed and is eaten up by the stepmother. As Ye Xian is crying over the loss of her fish, a fairy appears from the sky and asks her to bury and pray to the fishbones, so that her wishes will be granted.

With the help of the fish's spirit, Ye Xian goes to the cave festival, dressed up in clothes made of kingfisher's feathers and a pair of golden shoes, and drops one of the shoes, which is later acquired by the King of Tohan 陀汗 and arouses his curiosity in its owner. Ye Xian soon becomes his chief wife, while the stepmother and stepsister are killed by flying stones. The fishbones also become a source of wealth for the king in the first year, until they lose their power and he buries them in the shore. When some mutineers open the burial place, hoping to get better provision for the army, the bones are finally washed away by the sea.

Comparative Cultural Study of Cinderella

Qian 钱淑英 (2006) is among the very few scholars who have conducted comparative studies on the Cinderella story of the Chinese and Western traditions. She is wrong in suggesting that the story of Ye Xian is the 'earliest, complete record' of the Cinderella prototype (Qian, 2006: 89), as the earliest version has been found to originate from Egypt,² though it is reasonable for her to believe that Ye Xian's story spread to the West and developed into the Western version of Cinderella (p. 89). Qian's most significant contribution about Ye Xian's story, nonetheless, is her contention that the language of a story, as well as its narrative structure, are much more important than the story itself, as they reveal a lot about the lives and spiritualities of the people of its culture (p. 90). She then discusses the remarkable differences between the two stories. Ye Xian only appears briefly, and coyly, at the festival, fearing that she will be discovered by her stepmother and stepsister, let alone that she does not have the chance to meet her future husband there; Cinderella, through her elegance and the beauty of her attire, transforms into the superstar of the ball and makes the Prince fall in love with her (p. 90). Moreover, while the King of Tohan traces the owner of the golden shoe out of curiosity, the glass slipper in Cinderella indeed becomes the love token between Prince Charming and the poor girl. Further differences are found at the ending: while the Prince and Cinderella 'live happily ever after', Ye Xian's story does not describe such a happy ending, but instead shifts its focus onto the fishbones (p. 90).

Upon further discussion, Qian contrasts the narratives of Ye Xian and Cinderella, as well as the role of the narrator in both. The former is a record of 'strange happenings', but the exact references to time,³ place and names indicate that the strange things in the story indeed happened; the latter, with an opening ('Once upon a time') that is typical of folk tales and fairy tales, obscures all these particulars, and the narrator fades behind the story, while the listener gets more involved in it (p. 91). Even the fairies, the stepmothers and stepsisters are not as similar as they seem to be. In Ye Xian's story, the magical fishbones do not bring perpetual happiness (as their magical quality is lost at the end), and the good fairy in *Cinderella* is not only a reward to the poor girl, but also compensates, in a way, her lack of motherly love (Qian, 2006: 92). Similarly, the wicked stepmother and stepsister in Ye Xian's story do not bring about further convolutions in the plot, as they are killed at the end, while Cinderella's stepmother and stepsisters help to bring out the climaxes towards the story's end (Qian, 2006: 93). Qian describes such a contrast in terms of plot, as well as their effects, that of 'stagnancy' and 'extension' (p. 92).

While Qian has done a very meticulous job in fleshing out the differences between the two *Cinderella* stories, she has not further developed her analyses to expound on what she calls the 'spiritual consciousness' of Chinese, as reflected in the story of Ye Xian. One cannot help asking, for instance, whether the pessimism in the Chinese story, particularly evidenced by the fading of the fishbones' power and their disappearance, reflect on the Buddhist tradition and its belief that earthly power and wealth are empty, considering the fact that Buddhism was at its prime during the Tang Dynasty. Furthermore, one suspects that the dichotomy of stagnancy and extension coined by Qian tends

to mirror the Orientalist view of Chinese culture, seeing its backwardness being articulated in the fictional narratives of a lot of Chinese literary masterpieces.

Translation and Feminism

This essay, nonetheless, is primarily interested in the feminist motif in Qian's interpretation of the Chinese story, which has yet to be developed – might Ye Xian's coyness be seen as typical of traditional Chinese women? If the role played by the glass slipper in the Western Cinderella story reveals a fetishist interest in the female feet, then is the King of Taohan's interest in the shoe, which overshadows his interest in the girl, an indication that the Chinese woman is even much more objectified than the Western Cinderella ever is? Finally, it must be noted that Qian has missed out on a very significant difference between the stories, which is that Ye Xian only becomes one of the king's wives, while the Western story seems to strongly indicate that the prince adheres to monogamy, 'living happily ever after' with the new queen, even though concubinage is by no means unique to Chinese culture.

This essay particularly focuses on two different translations of Ye Xian's story: renowned Sinologist Arthur Waley's translation, which first appeared in his journal article 'Chinese Cinderella Story' in *Folklore* (1947), and later in his book *The Secret History of Mongols and Other Pieces* (1963), versus Barbara Creed's (2003) translation, collected in the volume *A Tang Miscellany: An Introduction to Youyang Zazu*. Though the two translations only contain what appear to be minor differences, this essay argues that Waley's translation tends to articulate a feminist tension in the story in fleshing out the feminist potential inherent in the original story.

Translation becomes a highly politicised task in the era of feminism. As von Flotow (1997: 12) argues, translation has long been used as a trope for women's entry into the public sphere, carrying female forms of discourse and private language that has been marginalised into the dominant patriarchal code. Von Flotow (1997) describes several feminist trends in translation: the translation of radical feminist writing (pp. 14–24), interventionist feminist translation, in which feminist translators make changes so that the text reports what they consider feminist truths (pp. 24–39) and the recovery of works lost in patriarchy (pp. 30–34). Regarding the second trend, the 'translator effect' is strongly felt in the target text, by translators who claim responsibility for their meanings (pp. 35–41).

Taking von Flotow's argument, and considering the gender of the two translators in the present essay, one would normally expect the more recent translation by Creed to likely contain feminist messages, or at least evince a higher consciousness of the gender issue. This essay nonetheless will argue otherwise, and suggest that the sensitivity towards gender in the target language might be both intentional and unintentional. Benjamin, in 'The Task of the Translator' (1923/1968: 22), contends that a 'real translation' is 'transparent' in that 'it does not cover the original, does not black its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium to shine upon the original all the more fully'. Nonetheless, it ultimately relies on

the quality of the source work: the lower the quality and distinction of its language, the 'less fertile' it is for translation; on the contrary, the higher the level of a work, the more does it remain translatable even if its meaning is 'touched upon only fleetingly' (p. 22). Benjamin's contention that low-quality work is less translatable, in my opinion, has really gone too far; yet I would argue that because Duan's work belongs to the genre of 'travel-record literature' and is more narrative than descriptive, its relative lack of literary merit seems to have encouraged rewriting in translation, to the extent that the target version deviates from the source text.

Waley's Translation and the Feminist Tension

Barbara Creed's translation presents a very feminine picture of Ye Xian, and it would not be too much to say that it accentuates the femininity in the Chinese version. A good example is what I consider a faithful translation of what happens after Ye Xian has discovered that the fish is gone: '逾日，女至向池，不复见鱼矣，乃哭于野。忽有人被发粗衣，自天而降，慰女曰：`尔无哭...`' (Duan, 1981: 200). Creed's translation (p. 112) runs as follows:

She went out to the countryside to wail with grief. Suddenly out of the sky appeared a person with loose hair hanging down and wearing coarse clothing. He comforted the girl, saying, 'Don't cry'

Ye Xian's kindness towards animals is therefore foregrounded. Another very faithful translation that accentuates her femininity is found at the moment when Ye Xian appears in front of the king for the first time: '叶限因衣翠纺衣，蹑履而进，色若天人也。' (Duan, 1981: 201). Creed translates it as 'Yexian then dressed in her robe spun of kingfisher blue and her golden shoes and went to the king, as lovely as an angel' (p. 113). Yexian's feminine beauty is therefore emphasised, while her mental ability is overshadowed.

A very subtle difference appears between the two translations, when the stepmother is trying to trick Ye Xian into changing her clothes, so that she herself can put on her clothes and entice the fish to come out for her to kill it: '尔无劳乎，吾为尔新其襦。' (Duan, 1981: 200). In Creed's translation, 襦 *yu* is faithfully translated as 'clothes': 'You have certainly worked hard. I'm going to give you some new clothes' (p. 111). In Waley's translation, however, 襦 *yu* is rendered as 'dress', which refers specifically to a woman's clothes, hence has a far more feminine connotation: 'Haven't you worked hard! I am going to give you a new dress' (p. 149). Does it mean that Ye Xian is presented as more feminine in Waley's translation than in Creed's? The answer is no, as 哭 *ku*, correctly translated as 'cry' and 'wail' in Creed's translation, is conveyed much more strongly as 'howling' in Waley's (pp. 149–150):

She howled with grief in the open countryside, and suddenly there appeared a man with his hair loose over his shoulders and coarse clothes. He came down from the sky. He consoled her, saying, 'Don't howl!'

The act of howling not only carries much more emotional impact, but as Ye Xian is portrayed as 'howling in the open countryside', her action becomes

reminiscent of some vengeful female ghost – stock characters in folk literature of many cultures, which act as subtle critique of the patriarchal society.

A more noticeable difference between the two translations is found in the appearance of Ye Xian in front of the king. As 色 *si* most probably means beauty, Creed is correct when she describes Ye Xian, who is like 天人 *tienren*, as a 'lovely angel'. Waley's translation carries much ambiguity, however: 'Yeh-hsien then came forward, wearing her cloak spun from halcyon feathers and her shoes. She was as beautiful as a heavenly being' (p. 150). As he himself explains, 'a heavenly being' probably suggests some 'Buddhist angels' commonly found in Buddhist paintings and wall engravings; in this sense, *tienren* does not simply refer to the astounding physical beauty of Ye Xian, but her spiritual quality, hence carrying the feminist messages that not only the physical beauty of a woman should be valued, and that a woman's spiritual qualities can acquire herself a holy status so that she becomes more worthy and more powerful than mortal men. The feminist tension, premised on ideological conflicts in the text, is again built up by what follows. Creed adds an explanatory note in her understanding of how Ye Xian 'serves' the king soon after their encounter: '始具事于王，载鱼骨与叶限俱还国。' (Duan, 1981: 201), and her translation goes: 'She began to serve the king (as wife), and he took the fishbones along with Yexian back to his country' (p. 113). After describing Ye Xian as a Buddhist angel, Waley does not make it clear how exactly Ye Xian 'serves' the king: 'She now began to render service to the king, and he took the fish-bones and Yeh-hsien, and brought them back to his country' (p. 150). It is clear, nonetheless, that Ye Xian, despite her affinity to a heavenly angel, remains in a subordinate position to the king who apparently redeems her from her subservient position to her stepmother: like in Creed's translation, Ye Xian and the fishbones are juxtaposed and parallel each other in their passivity and objectification in being carried by the king to his country, as if they are both treasures, and of the same rank.

What might have escaped the notice of the reader and the folklorist is the translations of the predicament of the stepmother and her daughter, which constitute the anti-climax of the story: '其母及女即为飞石击死，洞人哀之，埋于石坑，命曰懊女冢。洞人以为祀，求女必应。' Creed's version contains its own inaccuracy in this case:

Her stepmother and sister were killed by flying stones, but the cave dwellers took pity on them and buried them in a stone pit, calling it the 'distressed woman's tomb'. The cave people did matchmaking sacrifices at this tomb; if they prayed for a woman there, the wish would certainly come true. (p. 113)

In translating their feelings for the two women, Creed seems to indicate that the cave people are superior to them as they 'took pity on them'. However, the singular form is used for the two women in 'distressed woman's tomb'. By contrast, Waley's translation goes as follows:

The cave people were sorry for them and buried them in a stone-pit, which was called the Tomb of the Distressed Women. The men of the

cave made mating-offerings there; any girl they prayed for there, they got. (p. 151)

The superiority of the cave people is somewhat eliminated in the phrase 'sorry for them', and the plural form 'women' is rightly used. Most significantly, the plural form has the additional function of generalising the fate of women, as it indicates that the position of women during that time was lowly, leading to the fact that a lot of them lived in distress. What demands even greater attention is the translation of 求女必应 *qiunu biying*, which most likely means that the wish for a girlfriend/wife will be granted for the cave people who make sacrifices at the tomb. Creed's translation is close to the original, while Waley's translation indicates that the man can just obtain any girl/woman. As Waley indicates that just any woman can be obtained by means of offerings, his translation accords a lot of power to the ones who pray and offer (men), meaning that what is offered (women) become even more objectified than what the original text conveys.

Indeed, despite Qian's analysis of Ye Xian's story and her emphasis on her coyness, this Chinese story might contain more feminist potential than the Western counterpart. While Cinderella is only known to be hardworking, Ye Xian excels in metal works in Creed's version, or in pottery in Waley's version. As Waley emphasises, pottery is generally a man's work during that period in China, though he uses this as a piece of evidence that the story is not about Chinese, but some aboriginal people in the extreme south (p. 153). Waley's translation and analysis of the story, as they seem to me, articulate the feminism in the original text in a rather unintentional manner.

The two translations nonetheless are the same in one very interesting aspect. It is unclear whether the heavenly figure who descends from the sky is male or female, but in both translations it is described as a 'he', probably induced by the appearance of the figure in 粗衣 *caoyi*, or coarse clothes, which does not evoke a very feminine image. However, as Waley suggests about 'heavenly beings', which Ye Xian resembles in her beauty, such a figure might very well have been female.⁴ As Qian indicates that the fairy queen serves as the surrogate mother to Cinderella and compensates for her lack of motherly love, then the heavenly being might well perform the same function to Ye Xian. On deeper reflection, it does make sense that the sex of the heavenly figure in the Chinese version remains ambiguous: in the Buddhist realm of formlessness, the two opposite sexes become unimportant. The attribute of sexlessness means that the angel has risen above the sexual dichotomy,⁵ hence without the risk of running into a reversed form of sexism. Such sexlessness therefore offers the story much feminist potential.

Feminist Appropriations of Ye Xian's Story

The reader might be familiar with other versions of the Chinese Cinderella. One example is collected in Eberhard's (1938: 17–23) *Chinese Fairy Tales*, which resembles Duan's story in its motifs of the stepmother and the slipper, but virtually nothing else (Waley, 1963: 158). Indeed, Eberhard's version portrays a Cinderella that is headstrong and fierce.⁶ Given the feminist potential in the

original text and the feminist tension articulated in Waley's translation, it is not surprising that the story has been appropriated by Adeline Yen Mah in her *Chinese Cinderella: The Secret Story of An Unwanted Daughter*. An abridged version of her memoir *Falling Leaves: The True Story of An Unwanted Chinese Daughter*, which tells the story of her struggle against her stepmother and her success in career and marriage, this is written in simple language to cater for the market of young readers. In what purports to be an educational story, Aunt Baba, Adeline's surrogate mother, paraphrases the story of Ye Xian in a letter to the girl, which is a misinterpretation of the original story: perhaps for the purpose of encouraging young Adeline to work hard, Ye Xian is said to exchange one of her pots for her pair of golden shoes, and she earns her happy marriage entirely through her own efforts.

Donna Napoli's *Bound* is another example of feminist rewriting of Ye Xian, where the author includes all the familiar elements of the original – evil stepmothers, servitude and lost slippers – though rooting them in 14th-century China. Xing Xing becomes the headstrong, independent protagonist, in a story that has much historical and cultural detail, especially on the topic of gender, and the spirit of her mother plays a very significant role. Interestingly enough, *Wikipedia*, an online encyclopaedia that is fast becoming popular as a reference source, provides a paraphrase of Ye Xian's story, in which the heavenly angel also becomes the spirit of Ye Xian's dead mother. The feminist rewriting in *Wikipedia* is arguably due to carelessness and/or creativity, rather than feminist concerns on the writer's part – which is understandable in view of the void in the original text between the king's quest for the shoe's owner and his entry into the house where Ye Xian's family lives.⁷

In fact, folk tales and fairy tales like *Cinderella* have had their fair share of different versions. Owing to the special genre of Duan's story and the feminist potential of the Chinese text, the story will probably undergo further appropriations and rewritings in the future.

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Notes

1. Waley (1963: 147) believes that the story did not really originate from the Chinese, but some Aborigines in the extreme south of China, as Duan's Book shows a keen interest in foreign things (p. 148). Ye Xian does not sound like a Chinese girl's name (p. 153), and even the person surnamed Li, who related the story to Duan, was originally an aborigine (p. 156).
2. See Lai (2007: 168); cited from Fadl, Ayman, 'The Egyptian Cinderella'. *Aldokkan* [Cairo] 2001–2007. www.aldokkan.com/art/cinderella.htm.
3. Nonetheless, Waley (1963: 151) contends that 'Before the Han and Chin Dynasties' is another way of saying 'Once upon a time'.
4. There is a long tradition of benevolent goddesses in the Chinese tradition. Kuan Yin, the bodhisattva of compassion, is one of the most popular ones.
5. In fact, Kuan Yin has been presented as both male and female in various cultural traditions and different periods of China.

6. Amy Lai remarks on the boldness of Eberhard's *Cinderella*, who resists many of her suitors whom she does not find attractive, and who takes cruel revenge on her stepmother and stepsister in the end (p. 147).
7. Creed's translation indicates a lacuna in the text, while Waley indicates this in his explanatory notes that follow his translation, speculating that the king must have ordered someone to leave the show on the roadside, while Ye Xian picks up the shoe and he follows her into her house (p. 154).

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